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CHARACTERISTIC BIRDS OF THE DAKOTA PRAIRIES

I. IN THE OPEN GRASSLAND

By FLORENCE MERRIAM BAILEY

THE NORTHERN PACIFIC carried us out across the dead level of the old bed of Lake Agassiz and then up over the North Dakota couteau whose gentle morainal swells were left by the ice sheet. The bigness of the great open prairies slowly sinks into your consciousness as hour after hour you look out upon grain fields interrupted only at long intervals by a farm house, or a way station made conspicuous by tall grain elevators.

As we looked from the car windows we eagerly scanned the small sloughs, enticing little Dakota sloughs, small ponds in saucer-like depressions of the prairie, around which many of the prairie birds nest; but though we saw ducks sitting on the water and handsome Yellow-headed Blackbirds and fascinating Black Terns flying about, the train passed too rapidly for the recognition of many species.

Beating low over the fields was one bird whose identity could not be questioned, the Short-eared Owl, a characteristic bird of the prairie region. Of the anomalous day-hunting owls my experience had been limited to the Burrowing. How I longed to see *flammeus*! My first sight of one had been the other side of the Minnesota line when, on a fence post, a tall bird standing half round shoulderedly peering at us suddenly broke away, flapping off on wide brown wings. What bird-lover does not know the thrill of such a moment! Here was the Short-eared at last! An owl with big round head and slowly flapping wings bound not for dense woods but for the big bare prairie; an owl that seems at first blush as much of a target as an eagle flying freely about in the day time, making its nest and rearing its family safely in the open! Eloquent commentary on the great untenanted prairie!

A nest of this Flat-faced Owl, as it is called locally, was later reported to me on one of the big wheat farms bordering Stump Lake. It was said to be "in the

corner of S——'s wheat, near the first dead furrow," a location that sounded sufficiently definite until we drove over to investigate. Five people in all proved the wisdom of the owl's selection of a nesting site. It was the first nest the farmer had ever heard of in the wheat, but its proximity to the lane of the dead furrow made it seem possible, and as the wheat had not attained its full growth when the nest was reported to have two eggs—on June 19—the close level-topped stand of grain had risen around the nest with its increasing need for protection. An old owl who was presumably interested in the nest was seen hunting over the brushy shore flats at high noon, before there were impatient young to call for such an un-owl-like proceeding; and when the men were tramping the dead furrow at sundown, a *flammeus* hunting over the undulations of the grassy prairie turned back and flying in, lit on the ground and stood solemnly gazing at the exploring party.

Later in the season (July 8 and 9, 1912), between Stump Lake and Devil's Lake, we saw a number of Short-eared Owls flying about freely in the daytime. A dark-colored young one flying low over the ground in the strong morning light was apparently doing its own hunting, but a family of grown young in another place was sitting around on stone piles as if waiting to be fed. One of the old light-colored hunters whom we saw beating over the ground, as we watched made a suggestive pounce, stretching forward drolly as if sliding to a base. Another *flammeus* on whose premises we ate a camp supper perched spectacularly on top of a telephone pole watching us for some time, but finally flew out over the fields to get its own supper.

While the owls were easily recognized at quite a distance, when pin-heads in the big prairie landscape they had to be distinguished from Marsh Hawks; for, while a few families of owls might be seen in a twenty-mile drive across the prairie, Marsh Hawks were seen so frequently that it seemed as if their territories must sometimes overlap.

While Asio and Circus were landscape features, two of the largest, most characteristic, and perhaps generally distributed birds of the prairie region, the Prairie Hen and Sharp-tailed Grouse, were rarely seen unless by some lucky accident they were flushed from cover—a sore disappointment to me, for the thought of being among them had been one of the strongest allurements to my journey to North Dakota.

What bird student, out of their range, has not looked upon the pictures and museum groups of Prairie Hen dances with rapt wonder and dreamed fondly of witnessing them some day for himself? We were too late for the dances in North Dakota, but on our way north had one memorable experience in Minnesota.

"There are the Prairie Hens crowing!" the men would interrupt themselves to exclaim over what seemed to my unaccustomed ears only faint squeaky sounds and a hint of low booming. As the birds are at their best in the early morning, we were called at 4:30 with an urgent, "The Prairie Hens are crowing now!" and were soon driving between meadows white with dew, drinking in the cold invigorating air, mountain air compared with what we had escaped from. Keeping our field glasses ready to sweep every plowed field that came in sight and our ears strained for the low occasional booming, we turned corner after corner in the direction of the sound till suddenly the horses were reined in with the exclamation, "There are two hens!"

The female was walking about demurely, but the male—was there ever such a droll figure? As I gazed spellbound, the cocks of the National Museum group rose before me. It was their exact pose—body hanging head down, tail cocked

over back, neck pouches inflated like oranges, long black neck tufts projected beyond the yellow pouches. Joyful moment to actually see them in the flesh! Nondescript calls, strange cackles, together with muffled booming that sounded little louder than it did a mile across the farms, came from the cock strutting back and forth across the hilltop. The female, looking in the distance like an ordinary hen, shadowed the background, giving point to the dramatic performance and the conduct of the two cocks, for a second had come up over the hill and the two flew at each other, hopping up into the air—dancing?—in their excitement.

On another knoll a third cock appeared, and strutted around booming and crowing so ostentatiously, so compellingly, that we could but discover the cause—a demure, indifferent hen picking around in the corner of the field below. Though we saw but five birds, the farmer who owned the hill told us that there were as many as a dozen that frequented it.

Ten days later when driving with a farmer in North Dakota—driving in the free western way over fields pitted with badger holes one moment and through silver-leaf bushes up to the horse's head the next—a Prairie Hen sprang up from before the horse's feet and with white outer tail feathers conspicuous sailed low over the grass for a few yards, then lit and ran with dragging wings and vanished. We got out and hunted around till we flushed her from some low bushes, when she flew with a *kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk*. The farmer going back to the spot from which she had first risen called me, for shrill piping voices were coming from invisible chicks in the grass. At the alarming sound of human voices, however, the well-trained brood fell silent and we had to leave them undiscovered.

After that most of the "Prairie Chickens" I saw in North Dakota were Sharp-tailed Grouse! When the big birds whirr up from under your feet, the projecting tail feathers are a great help in identification and might well deter the broods from following after strange mothers, or so it seemed when a parent of each species flew up beside our road, one of them trailing a large family of young.

I had several interesting encounters with *Pediocetes*. One day, when impelled to answer the call of the prairie in spite of the heat that was rousing sore complaints at the farm, I headed for a small clump of cottonwoods that suggested good nesting sites. The three farm dogs reached the trees before me flushing a grouse with pointed tail which flew with beat and soar, several beats and a soar, uttering a low guttural *cluck-uk-uk-uk-ak*. As I stepped from the hot sun into the shade of the cottonwood thicket, the little trees rustled hard with the prairie wind, fanning out coolness, and the dogs made a bolt for the inside of the clump where they lay with tongues out and sides beating. The old Grouse had shown excellent judgment on a hot summer day.

A few mornings later (July 3), the farmer came in and asked if I wanted to see some Prairie Chickens, that being the general term for the two forms of grouse. He had seen an old hen and her brood in the potato patch. As we walked slowly down between the rows of potatoes, small yellowish brown chicks which looked like young turkeys, one with a suggestion of crest, flew from almost under our feet. Farther on, the mother started out from cover and crouching over like a hunter 'making a sneak', ran with swinging gait down the furrows. When pressed she flew at a wide angle from the young, though all headed for the strip of woods at the foot of the hill.

At this point the farmer returned to the house, but I walked slowly and

quietly down the potato patch toward the woods in which I supposed the old grouse was hiding. Near the foot of the patch, on a mowed strip between it and the woods, to my surprise a pointed head, and long neck, and then a mottled body appeared. Had the old grouse seen the retreating farmer and failing to discriminate between one and two, inferred that the coast was clear and come out of the woods to gather her brood? On discovering me she made a curved flight, with pointed tail showing, swinging around me into the woods to which she was followed by one of her young. After an interval during which I sat silently in the shadow of the woods the old grouse flew back across the width of the field to the place from which we had first flushed her and where she had probably been engaged in the useful occupation of eating potato-bugs.

The young were calling in the woods behind me, and before long, bursting out over my head, a little yellowish brown form crossed over to the potato patch in the direction the mother had taken. But its short wings were unequal to her long flight and it soon soared down, though after a rest it again started in her direction. A second young one essayed to follow, but too timid, circled back to cover once more. Small voices came from the woods behind and on both sides of me growing closer till a soft little whistle—*whee-aye-ee*—made me look down. About a yard away, on the edge of the broken ground stood a yellowish nestling streaked and spotted with black and white, wisps of down blowing about its head and body. Stretching its long neck till it looked as if on tip-toe it gazed in the direction its mother and brother had taken. Its bit of a tail jerked as it whistled, its bill opening for the first syllable—*whee*—and staying open for the *aye-ee*.

Three more young flew out of the woods while I waited, but dropped into the corn field beside the potato patch. One of them ran timorously up between two rows, squatting down under some friendly corn blades; but the cover was so thin that the little fellow's dark neck line showed. Kingbirds, gulls, a Sparrow Hawk, and a Marsh Hawk flew over. A Richardson ground squirrel that ventured out wisely scooted across the field and then sat up picket-pin style looking for danger. No one knew who might come next. So the well-trained little grouse lay close.

Other families of young were soon abroad in the land. When driving between Red Willow and Devil's Lake on July 8 and 9, we scared up a number of quarter-grown broods, pretty little striped stubby-tailed chicks. Sometimes the mother burst out of cover, ostentatiously soaring off in the opposite direction from her young; once she ran enticingly along the road ahead of us, and once walked slowly and deliberately over the winrows of hay by the road, her sharp tail pointed up, while at least eleven young scattered out in different directions.

Another day not far from Red Willow Lake, Mr. Bailey in driving over the prairie came onto an old grouse with a large family of little chicks. While the chicks with a scurry melted into the grass, the old grouse began a painful fluttering and flopping and tumbling on the ground just in front of the horses. The shepherd dog at the rear of the wagon bolted past the brood and thought that he almost caught the old bird who flopped and sputtered just beyond his nose till he was well in for the chase, when she led him on to the top of the farthest ridge, nearly a mile away. She then soared off in a wide circle and later, as the dog, panting and exhausted, caught up with the wagon a quarter of a mile from where he had started, the old grouse circled back to her hiding brood.

In summer the grouse have abundant food, and in winter they are said to

gather along the woods and thickets of wild rose, silverberry, and thornapple, to eat the haws and berries. The straw stacks left unburned in the wheat fields may also afford them some food, but in severe weather the need of additional supplies may well be felt. This need was recognized one winter by a farmer who, though having the reputation of being "the meanest man in the county," was met by a neighbor carrying a load of wheat to a self-feeding granary in the woods because he "could sleep better if he knew the chickens had something to eat!" As the winter proved the worst in years he had good reason to rest better for his Samaritan act. Since then, we were told, the postal authorities have authorized the rural route mail-carriers to distribute corn supplied to them whether by individuals or the Fish and Game Commission of the state.

Another characteristic bird of the prairies of which I saw all too little was the Upland Plover. One parent whom we passed when driving stood high in the prairie grass looking at us while just the head of its young one showed above the grass. Another plover surprised me, standing not on the ground but on top of a telephone pole, its round head and trim body mounted high on its long legs—true wader of meadows! On another day a guarding parent appeared in the blue sky ahead of us as we drove slowly up a long slope. Down it came toward us, its long wings on the down stroke giving it a curious wish-bone figure. Down it came, though not concerned with us as it proved, for, passing by, it took a wide sky circle on fluttering wings—while a Marsh Hawk heedless of its secret went serenely on its way looking for meadow mice. When the plover's liquid note is heard or the big birds come out of the sky to drop to earth, they give a rare thrill of pleasure. How much more were one fortunate enough to hear all their notes and watch their fascinating maneuvers. Lovely birds! They go well with the big clean prairie—dividing their time between earth and sky.

Among the kindred spirits of the plains are the Longspurs, noted for their ecstatic flight song, birds that I had looked forward most eagerly to seeing in North Dakota. But here again I was sorely disappointed for I reached only the eastern edge of their present range. The few Chestnut-collars that I saw were in the old level valley of the Sheyenne River, as were most of the Horned Larks seen during the summer. The Longspurs were no disappointment when found, striking birds perching on fences, showing their black chests, running along the road ahead of the horses showing their chestnut napes, or best of all springing up from the grass into the air to sing on fluttering wings their bright charming song suggestive of the jubulations of the Bobolink. How it made you want to stay and watch them! Longspurs and Lark Buntings! Lucky the ornithologist who can visit their breeding grounds. The Longspurs, like the Burrowing Owl, have been driven out by the breaking of the prairie, it is said, which would explain their absence in the wheat belt where I spent the summer; for wheat and flax fields have restricted the prairie mainly to a few hillsides and grassed-over sloughs.

In these scattered prairie islands the Bobolinks still find choice nesting grounds, spots of peculiar interest if you are new to prairies. From the top of one of the low swells you look down on great stretches of bluish green wheat with only round sunken islets of waving prairie grass. The unheaded wheat stands immobile on its sturdy stalks, but the long slender-stemmed prairie grass bows with every breath of the breeze—wavelets chase each other over the surface—and if you walk through the slough the sensitive grass sways and

waves and bows about you, the sheen of the sun on its bent stems. Then there are the prairie flowers on the hill-sides! Black-eyed susans, purple cone flowers, a variety of locos hiding their poison under soft pinks and lavenders, slender stems hung with drooping blue bells, patches of white anemones, and best of all, the beautiful red prairie lily, prairie cousin of the tiger lily. In these wild gardens Robert o' Lincoln raises his brood. But he must be about it, for while the grain is still standing the grass ripens and his family must be ready to fly before the mower. For even the sloughs are mowed, as hay is scarce. A singular effect is produced of mowed circles in big wheat fields. Before the mower comes, the Bobolink must put on his brown traveling suit. The last of July no blackcoats were in evidence, but large flocks of brown ones were seen rising from the fields with the unmistakable Bobolink *klink*.

A few black-coated Lark Buntings were seen before moulting time in the Sheyenne River valley, the only ones met with all summer, found the same day and near the same part of the valley as the Longspurs. Rare birds on the eastern edge of their range that, like the low forms of sagebrush in the vanguard, fill the mind with rich western memories. Calamospiza had been in my mind all day, and as we drove along near nightfall we suddenly came to the little band of four. Never had Buntings looked so handsome, their coats never so jet black, their wing-patches never so snowy. Happy moment! Well may it be remembered with all its setting; for that was a worthy one, the slanting sunset light vivifying the green of the combed wheat fields, warming their yellow straw stacks, glowing softly over the smooth dimpled prairie hills in the background.

Sunset comes so late and sunrise so early in that country of high latitudes that the birds must either have abnormally long days, take long noonday naps, or, like Stevenson's children and all good North Dakota farmers, "go to bed by day"; for on the longest June days the sunset glow lasted till ten o'clock and it was daylight again between three and four, the birds beginning to sing as promptly as if it were time to get up. Owls and Nighthawks might well have to hunt by day! The few Nighthawks I saw in the day time were perching on fence posts or telegraph poles from which it was easy to make aerial sallies.

Besides these more notable birds of the open grassland, there were the minor songsters of the prairie. The humble voices of the Savannah and Grasshopper sparrows often rose from the weeds and fences as we passed, and the thin tinkle of the Horned Lark was also sometimes heard from the broken ground. Minor songsters, surely, but even philosophers sometimes find it hard to make such a cheerful noise in the world.

Kingbirds undeniably come in the category of minor songsters, but their cheerful noise is often vituperative. Be this as it may, as you drive across the prairie, they—and there are two forms of them, the Eastern and the Arkansas—often possess the fences, an Eastern on one length of wire perhaps, and an Arkansas on the next; and both birds frequent not only the fences but the shore-line, the Eastern bird apparently catching insects started up by the incoming wavelets.

While the Savannah, and Grasshopper sparrows, Horned Larks, and Kingbirds are all minor songsters, the Vesper Sparrow and the Western Meadowlark—two of the most familiar birds of the prairie—come in an entirely different musical category. The two, unlike as they are, may be classed together, for the quality of the Vesper's song at its best allies it to that of the Meadow-

lark whose pure minor notes have the sweetness, the serenity, and uplift that belong to the big clean prairie open under the sky. Beautiful prairies! How they fill the imagination and free the mind of the escaped city dweller! Miles and miles of prairie with hardly a house in sight, unclouded skies, and strong vivifying sunshine tempered by the cool fresh wind from far away!

Washington, D. C., May 23, 1915.

A WALKING EAGLE FROM RANCHO LA BREA

By LOYE HOLMES MILLER

WITH ONE PHOTO BY H. S. SWARTH

TO DISCUSS in a magazine of ornithology an extinct species of bird whose latest known remains are perhaps a quarter of a million years old may seem a bit of an impropriety—an unwarranted liberty to take with THE CONDOR's pages; yet many have indiscreetly (or politely) enquired from time to time of the progress of work on the Rancho La Brea fossil birds; hence this proffered contribution. The finding of remains of Labrador Duck, Pallas Cormorant, or Great Auk, would furnish a news item which many would read with great interest. An egg of the Great Auk put up at auction among enthusiastic collectors would stimulate an interest easier to imagine than to describe. These birds are extinct. Most ornithologists know, and will know, little of them beyond the fact that they are extinct, yet the very name has a sound that catches the attention. It is hoped that *Morphnus daggetti* may appeal as having at least the distinction of extinction. Really, though, to the enthusiast, there are other reasons why he is of interest.

Among the hundred thousand or more bird bones in the collection made at Rancho La Brea by the Los Angeles Museum of History, Science, and Art, there have been found two specimens which represent a species of eagle of most astonishing character. The part represented is that segment of the posterior limb known to the ornithologist as the tarsus—perhaps the most characteristic bone of the bird's body. This certainly is an eagle's tarsus. It is somewhat less in transverse measurement than is the same bone of the golden eagle (*Aquila*), but in linear dimension it is nothing less than startling. When it is laid alongside of the tarsus of the Great Blue Heron (*Ardea*, see fig. 63) there is seen to be less than a quarter of an inch difference in length between the two bones. An eagle on stilts is the instant impression—an impression not new to one who has seen that South African anomaly, the Secretary Bird (*Serpentarius*), yet an impression that comes as a breath-catching surprise here in the vicinity of Los Angeles.

It was the writer's great pleasure, through courtesy of the New York Zoological Society, to enter the cages at the Bronx and study the live Secretary Bird in its feeding, running, and perching actions. The prehensile function of the foot has been entirely abandoned for the sake of an ambulatory function. The Secretary Bird is indeed a stilt-walker—an eagle without talons. When the long-shanked eagle from the asphalt was first encountered, the questions at once arose: "Is there evidence of degeneracy as an eagle? Was he a walking bird? Does he show kinship with South Africa and her Secretary Bird?"